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Halloween in America: Contemporary Customs and Performances

JACK SANTINO

Halloween in America is a very popular holiday marked by a great deal of expressive culture which calls attention to itself and the day to which it belongs. Traditional Halloween activities include the making of decorations for the home, such as jack-o'-lanterns, displays of fruits and vegetables, harvest figures, and paper witches and skeletons. Another major Halloween activity is the making and wearing of costumes and masquerading in the streets of urban America. Also, the belief in and rumors about people who put razor blades in apples or drugs in candy is a very strong component of contemporary Halloween verbal lore, given credence and corroboration by the 1982 Tylenol scare.

Despite the obvious wealth of symbolic and traditional activity attendant to the day and, indeed, the entire season of the year in which it occurs, Halloween has been studied by folklorists only sporadically. Most books on Halloween seem to be children's books; the best of these, such as Edna Barth's *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts*, tells us something of the history of the holiday.¹ More often, good information on Halloween is found either in books on related subjects, such as Katherine Briggs's works on fairy lore,² or in ethnographic studies of Celtic peoples, such as that of the Welsh by

Earlier versions of this paper were read at the 1982 meetings of the American Folklore Society, the Smithsonian Institution Celebration Lecture Series, and for the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. I would like to thank Samantha Hawkins, Alan Jabbour, and Lucy Long for their help in developing the paper and the ideas it contains.

1. Edna Barth, *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts* (New York, 1972).

2. See, for instance, Katherine Briggs, *Pale Hecate's Team* (London, 1962); *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London, 1967); *The Vanishing People* (New York, 1978).

Trevor Owens³ or those of the Irish by John Messenger⁴ and, more recently, by Henry Glassie.⁵ Ralph Linton has provided a general history of the day,⁶ but it does not include consideration of the holiday as it is practiced in modern America. This is a common problem: the better studies are not concerned with the holiday as it is practiced in America today, while those that are very often present us with collectanea of beliefs, customs, and pranks. These, although they can be useful, often fail to provide relevant ethnographic data. One exception is Helen Sewell Johnson's "November Eve Beliefs and Customs," which does provide contemporary data with historical background but, again, is not concerned with the American situation.⁷

Carving jack-o'-lanterns and building dummies to decorate the porch or yard and dressing in (often homemade) costumes and parading in the streets are contemporary activities associated with Halloween today. Each can be examined from both a contemporary and a historical perspective. These activities are personal statements made in a participatory group or community situation, using culturally valued and shared symbols, most of which are centuries old. Likewise, the processes of tradition that have shaped both these symbols themselves and the symbolic activity are historical, and an examination of the origin and history of Halloween illuminates the continuity and the change in the meaningfulness of the symbols.

The two major activities I examine in this paper are the decorating of the home and of the self. Briefly, people decorate their homes with pumpkins, squash, ears of corn, and other fruits and vegetables that represent the "harvest" in some way or another. Very often, the pumpkin has been carved into (or painted as) a jack-o'-lantern. These figures are joined by macabre dummies and scarecrow-like figures that take their places on porches, in the front yard, or hanging from trees.

I have personally observed and photographed this phenomenon in the cities of Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C., and in the countryside of North Carolina and New England. Undoubtedly, these

3. Trevor Owen, *Welsh Folk Customs* (Cardiff, Wales, 1959).

4. John C. Messenger, *Inis Beag: Isle of Ireland* (New York, 1969).

5. Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone* (Philadelphia, 1982).

6. Ralph Linton, *Halloween Through Twenty Centuries* (New York, 1950).

7. Helen Sewell Johnson, "November Eve Beliefs and Customs in Irish Life and Literature," *Journal of American Folklore* 81 (1968):133-142.

figures are found in other areas as well. Often they are organically based: a full, standing figure in North Carolina features a pumpkin head; a lamppost is transformed into a scarecrow-looking figure by means of sheaths of corn in Pittsburgh. Others are not; they are ghoulish creatures made of cloth and wood and rags, crafted into witches and skeletons.

These figures are paralleled by the costumes people wear, outside in the streets on Halloween night. In cities across America, the Halloween costume parade (or mass gathering) has become an annual urban tradition, comparable to the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans. Although perhaps having grown out of a homosexual tradition, the idea is related to much older mumming practices, and participant observation has determined that today these events involve whole families and people of various ages, sexes, and races.

Oftentimes, the costumes are topical, so that we find Rubik's Cubes, Tylenol Packages, Prince Charles and Princess Diana. Figures from popular culture are frequently drawn upon: E.T., Ms. Piggy, Superman. Virtually anything imaginable is realized, and costumes are quite elaborate. People sometimes dress in groups, as a six-pack of beer, for instance, or as a face, where one person is a nose, two are eyes, and two are ears.

Such large scale, contemporary behavior, rooted in tradition, should not go unstudied. Roger Abrahams has noted the persistence of the connection of festivals to the passage of time and the cycle of the year, and to residual rhythms of agricultural life also.⁸ Halloween is especially interesting because, on it, people incorporate ancient symbolic forms and make contemporary statements with them. In the course of this article, I shall examine the origin and history of Halloween and discuss some of the customs and legendary creatures traditionally associated with it. This will serve as a context for an examination, using the ideas suggested by structuralism and symbolic anthropology, of the contemporary Halloween practices described above. The historical background suggests the dynamics by which meaning is located in these acts, the nature of that meaning, and why it persists and, indeed, flourishes today.

All of the customs I have been referring to can be traced directly to the ancient Celtic day of Samhain. Samhain was the first day of the

8. Roger Abrahams, "The Language of Festivals: Celebrating the Economy," in Victor Turner, ed., *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual* (Washington, D.C., 1982), p. 167.

New Year in the Celtic calendar and was one of four major calendrical festivals.⁹ The Celtic peoples once inhabited much of the European continent but were, by the time of Christ, pushed largely to the hinterlands. Today, their descendants include the Irish, Welsh, and Scots, and inhabitants of Brittany in Northern France. Our information about Samhain before the arrival of Christian missionaries is sketchy. Most of what we know of Samhain is contained in the ancient Irish sagas, but these were not written down until sometime between the 9th and 12th centuries, while the missionaries had arrived by the 5th century A.D.¹⁰ By the time these sagas were written, then, the festival had been undergoing pressure to incorporate Christian form and content for several centuries. Nevertheless, because both the oral tradition on which the sagas are found and the practices they document were much older than the earliest documents, these documents likely contain much factual description of early Samhain beliefs and practices.

From the sagas, we know that Samhain was the New Year's day of the Celts and that many mundane chores were measured against this day: crops must be harvested, farmsteads secured. Kevin Danaher describes work associated with Samhain thus:

Samhain, 1 November, was the first day of winter and the end of the farmer's year. All his crops, all his livestock had to be secure for the hard season to come. Corn of all sorts, hay, potatoes, turnips, apples must by now be harvested and stored with ricks well made and well thatched and tied. Dry cattle and sheep were moved from distant moorland and mountain pastures and brought to the fields near the farmstead. Milking cows were brought into the byre for the winter and hand-feeding with stored fodder began. In the South-east of Ireland, where this crop was grown, winter wheat had to be in the ground by this date.

Turf and wood for the winter fires must have been gathered, and lucky was the household which had in store a pile of bog-deal, the sweet-smelling, clean-burning roots or stems of ancient pine trees, found in cutting turf.¹¹

The first day of winter was a time of increasing darkness, of the death of vegetation and of the harvest. As such, all of those elements

9. Caolmhin Ó Danachair, "The Quarter Days in Irish Tradition" *Arv* 15 (1959):47-55. See also Messenger, p. 102-107.

10. Nora Chadwick, *The Celts* (New York, 1970), p. 193.

11. Kevin Danaher, *The Year in Ireland* (Cork, 1972), p. 206.

contributed to the symbolism of the day and became part of its power.

Just as the Christian celebration of Easter has combined pre-Christian fertility symbols such as eggs or rabbits with concepts of the renewal of the self as symbolized by the wearing of new and special clothes (Easter bonnets with flowers) and with the religious symbolism of the death and rebirth of a god, so did Samhain, the New Year's day of the Celts, incorporate symbols from different sources, combining agricultural and pastoral ideas of work and seasonal ideas of time with supernatural ideas of life and death. Coming at the time of year it did, it associated the fruits of the harvest with ideas of the afterlife and the otherworld.

Throughout the old stories, Samhain is the focal point: battles are fought then, journeys begun, wars decided. It was as if not only the year but the entire society and the cosmos itself revolved around this one day. In one tale, a hero named Nera is sent begging from door to door on Samhain. In the same story, Nera enters the fairy world through a cave. On Samhain, the entrances to the otherworld are open: "Great was the darkness of that night, and demons would appear on that night always."¹²

In another saga, known as the Second Book of Invasions, a race of supernatural beings known as Fomorians demand tribute from the people. The people become accustomed to delivering tribute in the form of goods and harvest fruits to the Fomorians at Samhain. Eventually they rebel and do battle.

Paying tribute to a race of gods at Samhain in the saga literature parallels the folk custom of setting out food and gifts to appease wandering spirits, which in turn parallels the folk practice of giving gifts of food and drink to maskers who imitate those spirits. This is called mumming, from a Danish word *mumme*, meaning to parade in masks.¹³ The road from the saga literature of the early centuries of recorded history to children in masks trick-or-treating door-to-door is a long one, with many intersections and forks and sideroads and curves, but we can already see in the earliest materials associated with the ancient ancestors of Halloween the beginnings of traditions still practiced today. We see the ideas of the dead wandering the earth begging food and the giving of food and drink in tribute and as payment to wandering spirits.

12. Tom Peete Cross and Clark Harris Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York, 1936), p. 248.

13. Alan Brody, *The English Mummers and their Plays* (Philadelphia, 1969), p. 4.

Born as a rite of transition to a new season and a new year, Samhain, like Halloween today, was marked by a great deal of calendrical customary behavior. It is the time of transition, the turning points, that people find most magical, most powerful, most dangerous.¹⁴ It was believed that at the time of transition to the new year, the souls of those who had died during the year assembled, and the living lit bonfires and sacrificed fruits and vegetables in their honor to expiate their sins. The souls of the dead were allowed passage to the land of the just. On the eve of Samhain, then, spirits were a'traveling. Since the day was a bridge between one year and the next, the barrier between the world of men and the world of spirits was also bridged. The eve of Samhain, as the eve of the new year, occurring at that point in an agricultural cycle when crops are harvested, and occurring at that point in the seasonal cycle when winter begins, was the crossroads of the Celtic year. Even today, in rural Ireland, as Henry Glassie points out, of all the "great days," i.e., the major holidays and festival days of the year, only one—Hallow Eve—occurs on a seam from one season to the next. All others in Ireland tend to be located squarely in the middle of the season.¹⁵

This dual level of symbology—fruits and vegetables and other organic items representing the harvest related to images and concepts of the dead and the otherworld—recurs again and again throughout the history of the holiday and is perhaps the central dynamic by which the holiday continues to be meaningful. The organic objects refer on the one hand to the harvest and the natural world, and at the same time come to represent the otherworld and the supernatural. We will examine this idea more extensively below.

As we have seen, the transcriptions of these sagas date from the 12th century. Although they document a much older tradition, they show the influence of Christianity. It was, in fact, because of the coming of Christian missionaries to Ireland sometime before the 5th century A.D. that Samhain underwent some fundamental changes. Eventually, the church would assign the Feast of All Saints to the 1st of November and define many of the Celtic divinities and spirits as demonic.¹⁶

14. On marginality, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London, 1966). On liminality, see Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, New York, 1969); "Betwixt and Between: the Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," in *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca, 1967), pp. 93-111.

15. Henry Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1975), pp. 96-97.

16. See, for instance, Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston, 1967).

In 601 A.D. Pope Gregory the First, known as Gregory the Great, issued a now famous edict to his missionaries concerning the native beliefs and customs of the peoples he hoped to convert. Rather than try to obliterate native peoples' customs and beliefs, the pope instructed, *use* them. If a group of people worship a tree, rather than cut it down, consecrate it to Christ and allow them to continue their worship. In terms of spreading Christianity, this was a brilliant concept and it became a basic principle in missionaryism. Catholic holy days were purposely set at the time of native holidays. Christmas, for instance, was assigned the arbitrary date of December 25th because it corresponded to the midwinter celebration of many peoples. Likewise, St. John's Day was set at the summer solstice.

Samhain, with its emphasis on the supernatural, was very pagan. So while missionaries identified Christian holy days with native holy days, their God and saints with native deities, they branded the earlier supernatural persons as evil and associated them with the devil. As representatives of the rival religion, Druids were considered evil, devil worshippers; and the gods and spirits they worshiped were just as devilish and demonic. The Celtic underworld inevitably became associated with the Christian Hell.

The effects of this policy were to diminish but not totally dispel the beliefs in the traditional gods. According to priests, fairies were fallen angels, thus identifying them with devils in Catholic theology. The spirits of the dead still traveled, fairies still roamed, but there were deliberate attempts to define these creatures not merely as dangerous, but as malicious. Followers of the old religion went into hiding and were branded as witches. The Feast of All Saints was assigned to November 1st in an attempt to substitute it for Samhain. The day was in honor of every Christian saint, especially those that did not otherwise have a special day devoted to them. This feast day was meant to substitute for Samhain, to draw off from it the devotion of the Celtic peoples and, finally, to replace it forever. In this it failed.

The old beliefs never really died out. The very powerful symbolism of the traveling dead was too strong, and perhaps too basic, to the human psyche to be satisfied by this new, more abstract Catholic feast day. Recognizing that something closer to the original idea of Samhain was necessary, the church in the 9th century tried again to supplant Samhain, this time establishing November 2nd as

All Souls Day.¹⁷ On this day, the living prayed for the souls of the dead. But, once again, the practice of retaining traditional customs while attempting to redefine them had the opposite result: the traditional beliefs and customs lived on. All Saints Day, otherwise known as All Hallows (the word hallow means saint, from the Middle English *halwe*, and we still use the word hallowed to mean sanctified or holy),¹⁸ continued the ancient, Celtic tradition. The evening prior to the day was the time of the most intense activity, both human and supernatural. People continued to celebrate All Hallows Eve as a time of the wandering dead, but the supernatural beings were now associated with evil. The folk continued to propitiate those spirits (and their representatives) by setting out gifts of food and drink. Consequently, All Hallows Eve, alias Hallow Even, alias Hallowe'en, is an ancient Celtic pre-Christian New Year's day in modern dress.

Just as the day was a transitional one, so are the creatures associated with it marginal and ambiguous. Fairies, in Britain, and witches and the jack-o'-lantern are perhaps the legendary creatures traditionally most associated with Halloween; a brief examination of the lore surrounding them suggests this marginality and is informative as regards contemporary practices.

The custom of carving jack-o'-lanterns is quite widespread in the United States, but the story of Jack-o'-Lantern is not as widely known here as it is in Great Britain.

The jack-o'-lantern is said to be the wandering spirit of a blacksmith named Jack, who was too evil to get into heaven, but because he had outwitted the devil, was not allowed into hell. Expelled from hell, he scoops glowing coal in the vegetable he is eating and uses it as a lantern to light his way as he wanders the earth.¹⁹ This trickster figure, then, who fits uneasily into a rigid, dualistic cosmology (such as Christianity), finds many parallels. As a traditional narrative, the story of the origins of the jack-o'-lantern exists

17. *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1967) 1: 318-319; see also Ruth E. Kelley, *The Book of Halloween* (Boston, 1919), p. 29.

18. I'd like to thank Alan Jabbour for clarification of this point.

19. On the Will-o'-the-Wisp, see, for instance, Katherine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, p. 52, and Carole Spray, *Will o' the Wisp: Folktales and Legends of New Brunswick* (Fredericton, N.B., 1979), pp. 16-19. See also "The Smith Who Could Not Get Into Hell," in Asbjornsen and Moe, *Norwegian Fairy Tales*, trans. Helen and John Gade (New York, 1924).

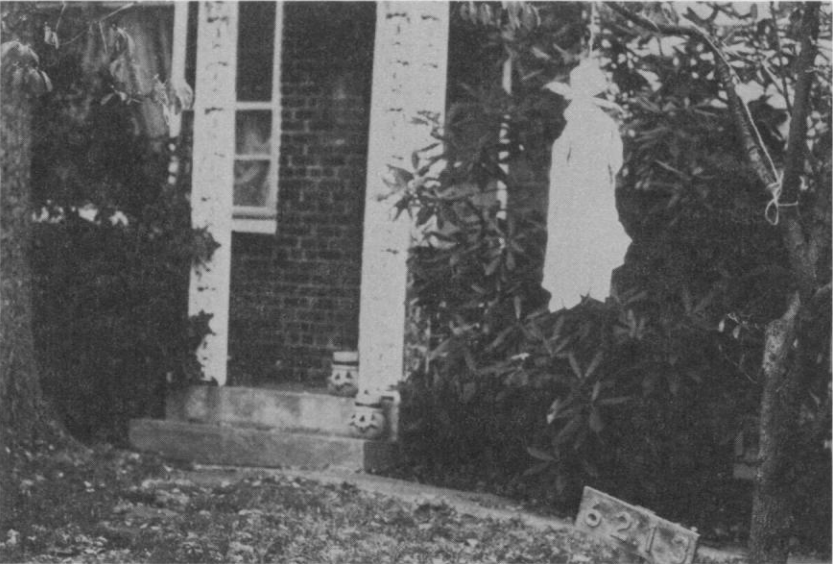


Photo by Lucy M. Long



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Photo by Paul Wagner

in many variants, and virtually the same story is given for the Will-o'-the-Wisp, who snatches a handful of burning straw from hell as he is refused entry. The motif of being excluded from both heaven and hell is a common one and is related to the idea of fairies being fallen angels. According to a version printed by Evan Wentz, fairies are angels who followed Lucifer in his rebellion, only to change their minds. They found themselves locked out of both heaven and hell, and instead inhabited the rivers, streams, rocks, and woods of this middle earth.²⁰ Moreover, fairy lore is itself contradictory: for instance, the fairy queen in Tam Lin (Child 39) is evil and malevolent, while in Allison Gross (Child 35) it is a fairy queen who rescues the knight from a witch's spell. Like the wandering spirits, fairies hide on Halloween, stealing men, women, and children. They too are most active on this day when the entrances to the otherworld—here, the fairy world—are open.

These marginal, ambiguous creatures are joined by witches. According to Child, it is highly unusual for a witch and a fairy to interact in a single ballad, as they do in Allison Gross,²¹ but they have always coexisted in another way on Halloween. Although they have an entirely different origin and history, witches are often identified and even confused with fairies in the folk imagination, especially in Scotland and Ireland. It is said, for instance, that witches sometimes steal babies and sell them to the fairies. Witches are also said to ride in the wild hunt, as do fairies, on Halloween. In some witch trials, confessed witches have testified that they had traffic with the fairies such as Isabel Gowdie, who went with the fairies "under the hills." There she met "the broad faced man who was the king of fairies, . . . and the . . . woman in white who was their queen."²²

It is beyond the scope of this paper to trace the history and development of Western European witchcraft, but we can draw attention to certain salient features that have become standardized and, in ways that will become apparent, continue to have an impact upon contemporary Halloween symbolism.

Some people claim that Western European witchcraft was and still is a continuation, often suppressed and driven underground, of ancient fertility and nature cults, and, indeed, a continuity exists between medieval witchcraft and the ancient fertility cults of the Greek

20. Evan Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (Oxford, 1911), p. 109.

21. Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (New York, 1965)1: 314.

22. Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, p. 90.

and Roman gods and goddesses, especially those of Pan, Dionysius, and Diana or Hecate. Moreover, the Greek nature god Pan, with his horns, his cloven hooves, his goat-like, animal nature, as well as the passionate ecstasy of his female devotees, was the most direct influence on the conception of the devil in Christianity. All those attributes—the horns, the hooves, the appearance as a goat-man—became attributes of the devil.

Nevertheless, there was not necessarily a direct line or a hidden underground movement to keep the old fertility cults alive. Rather, these cults contributed ideas and provided models for later movements to follow. In the medieval context, true witchcraft is a statement about Christianity made in its terms. While it is a rejection of Christ, it is a recognition of the Christian devil and a conscious embracing, not of natural forces, but of evil.²³

During the 9th century, the idea of the formal pact with the devil had entered into witchcraft tradition. All magic, the logic went, relied upon supernatural aid. Since this was not forthcoming from God to be used for maleficent purposes, it must be diabolical. Soon it was said that witches entered into a formal pact with the devil, renouncing Christ in a perversion of baptismal vows.

The various elements associated with witchcraft are now becoming increasingly standardized and formalized. In the 9th century, practices once associated with pre-Christian and non-Christian festivals and religions, such as dancing and revels, and belief in such things as shapeshifting and nocturnal flight were firmly associated with (and condemned as) attributes of witchcraft. In the 10th century, the list of such attributes grew to include the formalized pact, cannibalism, the sexual orgy, and the adoration of the devil. A document called the *Corrector*, written late in the 10th century, contains the first reference to the ability of witches to fly through the air on broomsticks.²⁴

However, the great witch crazes, with their torture, their forced testimony, and their mass executions, swept Europe *after* the Middle Ages had begun to develop into an early modern society, with a rising middle class and a population shift into the cities. Society was changing rapidly and the resulting stress found release in the witch accusations and executions. Over the course of the 16th and 17th

23. Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1972), p. 48.

24. Russell, p. 79.

centuries, it is conservatively estimated that as many as a half million people, most of them undoubtedly innocent victims, were put to death in Europe and Great Britain.²⁵

We know that the American colonists of the period knew of Halloween. It seems to have been a day by which yearly tasks and seasonal chores were measured. Jay Anderson quotes the contemporaneous 17th century almanac of Thomas Tusser²⁶ in this regard which suggests the way Halloween was perceived, like Samhain before it, as a day when certain husbandly jobs must be done:

At Hallowtide, slaughter time entereth in,
and then doth the husbandman's feasting begin.
From thence unto Shrovetide kill now and then some
their offal for household the better will come.²⁷

We see here the practical, agricultural aspect of the day in the yearly cycle, but it does not inform us as to beliefs associated with the day. We also know, of course, that the Puritans and colonists of the 17th century shared the witchcraft beliefs of the European continent. It was in 1692 that the famous Salem Village witchcraft trials took place. In all, only about thirty people were hanged as a result of these and eight more throughout New England, a small number in comparison to the estimated hundreds of thousands in Europe.²⁸ Like fairies, witches are surrounded by a corpus of lore that is not related to Halloween per se, but, because of their alleged allegiance to the devil, it was thought that witches were most active on Halloween, that they met then and flew about through the night searching for hapless souls to steal.

In the 19th century, when the great wave of Irish immigration to this country occurred, due in large part to the potato famine, the newly arrived immigrants found a body of fully formed witchcraft belief waiting for them. In turn, they brought their Halloween customs and beliefs from Ireland, and these were established here.

25. George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1929).

26. Thomas Tusser, *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* (London, 1848), and *A Hundred Points of Husbandry* (New York, 1973); Dorothy Hartley, ed., *Good Points of Husbandry* (Portway, Bath, 1969).

27. Quoted in Jay Anderson, "The Bountiful Yeoman," *Natural History* 10 (1982): 44.

28. Paul Boyer and Stephen Nusenbaum, *Salem Possessed* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1974); Kittredge, pp. 365-367; Chadwick Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem* (New York, 1972); Marvin L. Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts* (Garden City, New York, 1969).

These, then are some of the ideas and images that shape our Halloween holiday today. Returning to the present, we see that Halloween retains a connection to the harvest. This is evident, once again, in the customs associated with the day. In the fall, people begin decorating their homes, primarily the doorway, the porch and stairs leading to the doorway, and perhaps the front yard, in short the areas of their homes that are most in public view and most transitional, with fruits and vegetables that represent the season—autumn—and the harvest. The pumpkin is the most prominent, along with ears of Indian corn hung on the door. Squash and other seasonal vegetables are also used, in various combinations. These vegetables and fruits are often purchased at a roadside stand or from a commercial farmer who sells apples and other produce. For many people, part of the celebration of the season includes a trip into “the country,” there to get apples, cider, pumpkins, and other vegetables. Many of these, the pumpkin especially, are purchased primarily for decorative purposes. Even though the individuals who display them very often do not grow their own food and have little, if any, connection or experience with agricultural harvesting, the pumpkin and the corn represent a nostalgic and romanticized idea of the harvest and of rural life styles.

The fact that there is a trip involved is important as well, even if it is only a trip to the local market. Usually though, the trip is from an urban or suburban environment to a rural or semirural environment. The vegetables are brought back to the built environment as relics, or icons, of that rural environment, and displayed. The corn, or the pumpkins when left uncarved, can be displayed throughout the season, through Thanksgiving, our “official” harvest holiday. The unworked vegetable carries the general seasonal symbolism.

For Halloween, specifically though, the vegetables are worked. The pumpkin is carved and given a face. This is especially obvious when the jack-o’-lantern is seen in the dark, lit by a candle within. It then takes on a much more eerie, ambivalent, and frightening demeanor. Other than by carving, the pumpkin is transformed by means of painting or by using other vegetables as appendages. Houses may feature cutouts and paper representations of the jack-o’-lantern, either homemade or store bought, and of other Halloween figures as well. In fact, the transformation of pumpkin into jack-o’-lantern also extends to the growing number of “harvest

figures," which may or may not be built upon a vegetable or organic base.

What has happened, then, is the following: people from a built environment travel into a relatively natural environment, return with a physical embodiment of that natural environment, and display it as part of their built environment. We can see here a dichotomy of rural and urban, natural and built, and, ultimately, of nature versus culture. Bringing the pumpkins and the corn back into the city represents a movement to bring nature into, and display it as part of, culture. The tasteful, aesthetic arranging and displaying of these fruits and vegetables is in itself a cultural act. Usually, though, a cultural act is performed *upon* the vegetable: it is carved into a jack-o'-lantern, given an identity, and is thus connected to the other-world and the supernatural. The jack-o'-lantern, as we have seen, is one of a number of marginal creatures associated with death and the underworld that inhabit All Hallows, and so we have another transformation: the nature versus culture dichotomy, defined and eased by the bringing of the pumpkin to the built environment, becomes a life versus death dichotomy by virtue of transforming the pumpkin into a man-made object that represents the world of spirits. Nature versus culture is made to stand also for life versus death.

The fact that it is the home that is the showcase of the symbolic representations of death, of evil, of chaos, and the grotesque is important. These forces threaten the security and the stability of everyday life and the family unit, and it is through the symbolic representation of and the playing with these symbols that death takes its place as a part of life, a natural part of everyday life. Life versus death is the conflict; death in life is the rationalization, the mediation. Fears are formalized, somewhat playfully, and are taken out from under the bed, confronted, accepted, and incorporated into daily life.

Moreover, the connection to the harvest and the agricultural metaphor is important: the corn stalks remind us that generations must die in order for new ones to live; death is a reaper of men, a grim reaper perhaps, but an inevitable and necessary one nonetheless. Thus we have the easy transformation of images from unworked pumpkins and other vegetables to worked fruits and vegetables to representations of these images in other media, because once transformed, the representations are not strictly tied to the organic base and can be rendered in other media. This is also why

we have a range of symbolic choices from which to choose when decorating homes, from the worked vegetable to the cardboard skeleton, from natural objects to specific, culturally rendered images of death, often related via juxtaposition in the same display. The harvest is to the pumpkin as death is to the halloween figure; the transformation occurs by means of metaphoric extension, and any one of the elements in the analogy can stand for the other.

A comparison with some of the organic items used as Christmas decorations is interesting. The obtaining of the pumpkin is not unlike the getting of a Christmas tree, which in turn is decorated to render it more than simply a tree. In both cases an object is brought into a manmade environment and culturally transformed. The transformation allows for entirely artificial substitutions for the organic object because it is no longer the object but what it represents that is important. So we have cardboard jack-o'-lanterns and plastic Christmas trees. Moreover, just as the unworked vegetable comes to represent the harvest in general and becomes a general seasonal item, as in the case of the corn hung on the door, so does the wreath hung on the door survive the Christmas season specifically and is allowed to stay up throughout the entire winter season.

There are other interesting comparisons to make between Halloween and Christmas decorations as regards the public as opposed to the private presentation of these symbols. Although in both cases the home is decorated both within and without, the emphasis of the Halloween decorations is primarily external: the jack-o'-lanterns and the other objects are placed outside, on public display. On the other hand, despite the great attention paid to public display of Christmas decorations in the front yard, in the window, even in the placing of the tree near a window so that it can be observed from the street, the primary symbol²⁹ of the tree, as well as the religious symbol of the crèche, are within the home. At Halloween, children trick-or-treat in the streets, and adults parade in costume in the streets, while at Christmas, Santa Claus is said to enter the home through the *hearth*, where children receive their gifts in the company of the family, in privacy. Families and friends visit each other's homes, rather than parade in the street. This is especially so with the diminishing of caroling and mumming as Christmas activities;

29. Turner, "Betwixt and Between," p. 31.

neither caroling nor mumming are thriving Christmas customs today. This distinction between the public and the private orientation of the holidays is difficult to establish rigorously because so much of the Christmas symbolism is public and so much is associated with consumerism. Also, both holidays have public and private aspects. Nevertheless, the primary orientation of the two holidays does seem to vary along this line. Halloween features, as the primary manifestation of its symbolism, the decoration of the home and the self, both in very public displays.

The questions of consumerism and industry sponsored holiday decorations are important and germane to the discussion. In that regard, it is interesting to note that people I have interviewed explain their enjoyment of Halloween as being due to the fact that they consider it to be the least commercialized and the most participatory of holidays available to them. While this is not a scientific sample, it is nevertheless important that this perception is widely shared and voluntarily offered. Whether or not Halloween is in fact the “least commercialized” is unlikely; certainly, there are *attempts* to commercialize it, although these are not overly successful: according to one report, Halloween ranks eighth among holidays in terms of numbers of greeting cards sold.³⁰ Still, costume manufacturers, licensors of popular characters such as Spider Man and E.T., and, of course, candy manufacturers all do good business at Halloween. Moreover, Thanksgiving, with its shared meal and family reunions, and Christmas, with its gift-giving and parties, are certainly participatory.

Nevertheless, Halloween works for the individual as a public performance of a private persona, a personal participation in a group experience. Just as the pumpkin is transformed by giving it a face and a new personality, so are people transformed by adapting a mask, a new persona. The making of one’s costume and the fun of the streets and the crowds all contribute to this feeling and frame the personal creation in a public context. This mediation of a public-private dichotomy merges with the good-evil, life-death, and even nature-culture dichotomies to provide yet another reconciliation of cultural oppositions, and contributes to a unique feeling of mystery and exhilaration people associate with Halloween.

30. *USA Today*, 10 October 1982.

If death and randomness are incorporated into family stability and routine through the home decorations, the street seems to be the arena for the airing of more topical fears. Not only are traditional ideas of death and evil represented in the costumes, but also the Tylenol packages take their place alongside Rely tampons, nuclear waste, and other contemporary plagues.³¹ In fact, at the level of rumor and legend, contemporary fears of axe murderers and candy poisoners have joined, if not replaced, the fear of ghosts and witches, but the dread of the unknown and the uncontrollable continue to be addressed in both cases.

In the streets, however, alongside the topical images, we still find the same motifs that have been traditionally associated with Halloween through the centuries: ghosts, skeletons, witches, figures of death and the underworld. Bakhtin, in discussing the grotesque in folk festivals, has said that the devil presents us with a good case study of the change from the folk to the romantic treatment, in that, on the folk level, the devil is "a gay, ambivalent figure expressing the unofficial point of view, the material bodily stratum . . . whereas the Romanticists present the devil as terrifying, melancholy, and tragic."³² In the street festivals today, spontaneous and largely participatory, the devil has returned to the folk.

In New York, in 1981, there was a striking version of the god Pan, complete with horns, cloven hooves, and panpipes. As stated earlier, Pan is thought to be the direct influence and model for the Christian devil. However, it is likely that most of the Halloween revelers were unaware of that connection or of the connection to witchcraft through ancient fertility cults and ecstatic religions. Nevertheless, Pan was there. It seemed natural and right to see him on the streets of New York on this night. There was a cognitive and symbolic fit between Pan and all the other costumes, the decorated windows in the surrounding buildings, the figures adorning the houses, the festivity, the *communitas* as translated through these specific symbols that make this event a uniquely Halloween event. The cities become Mardi Gras, but only in that they vibrate to spontaneous masquerading. The symbolic language used is still drawn from and consistent with the ancient ideas of Samhain.

Mary Douglas, following Levi-Strauss and the structural linguists among others, points out that symbols have meaning only in relation

31. Don Hill, "Halloween in a College Town," unpublished paper.

32. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1968), pp. 40-41.

to one another.³³ Looking at Halloween as one in a series of cyclical American popular holidays, can we develop a syntactic approach to this cycle, wherein each holiday has its own symbolic identity manifested by its component elements and related to the others by its position in the cycle and the meanings thereby ascribed to it?³⁴ In other words can we see the holiday as a meaningful, discrete unit and develop a grammar of the symbolic year?

That such relative meanings exist in our yearly cycle is obvious: summer “begins” on Memorial Day weekend and “ends” on Labor Day; the Christmas season “begins” the day after Thanksgiving, and so on. I am calling for a study of the entire yearly cycle in these terms, an investigation of each holiday as it has meaning vis-à-vis its position in the cycle. Religious holidays, other than Christian, and personal holidays (anniversaries of birth, death, etc., as well as these rites of passage themselves) also shape this cycle for the individual. Before any such grammar can be worked out each holiday must be studied historically and ethnographically to determine the nature of its symbolic and cognitive meanings, as I have attempted to do for Halloween.

In conclusion, then, Halloween is still a harvest holiday, with its bobbing for apples, and its pumpkins, and its fruits and nuts and cider. In fact, games such as bobbing for apples and snap-apple are thought to be related to ancient divinatory games and rituals involving apples;³⁵ and beliefs involving apples and nuts to tell the future continue to be extant.³⁶ So once again we have the natural phasing into the supernatural, as fruits associated with the season of harvest take on supernatural dimensions. But Halloween is also becoming more of an adult holiday, more of a masquerade for grown-ups. Where once the spirits of the dead traveled on the crease of the New Year and people hoped to appease them with gifts of food and drink; where once people dressed in the costumes and went mumming as representatives of those wandering souls and were rewarded with soul-cakes and food and drink; where once children carried on the tradition of masquerading and roaming from home to home and

33. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York, 1973), p. 11.

34. Victor Turner, ed., *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual* (Washington, D.C., 1982), pp. 21-22

35. See, for instance, Danaher, pp. 203-204, and Kelley, p. 26.

36. See, for instance, Wayland D. Hand, *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions from North Carolina*, vols. 6 and 7 of the *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore* (Durham, 1961 and 1964).

demanding treats, dressed as skeletons, ghosts and witches—today adults in those and every other disguise imaginable take to the streets of big cities in America and parade past flickering, grinning, carved-out candlelit jack-o'-lanterns in great numbers. They are creating anew an ancient custom with a pedigree ancestry; they are challenging, mocking, teasing, and appeasing the dread forces of the night, of the soul, and of the otherworld that becomes our world on this night of reversible possibilities, inverted roles, and transcendent turnarounds. They are reaffirming death and its place as a part of life in a dizzying and exhilarating celebration of a holy and magic night.

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